

The Rt. Rev. Jeffrey Lee  
 The Third Sunday of Advent  
 St. Paul's Episcopal Church  
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### **Putting Off Now**

There was once a conference in hell. The question under discussion was how to keep humankind from finding God. One of the devils gets to his feet and said, "I know, I'll go to earth and tell everyone there's no God." "No," said the others, "That won't work. Deep down, most people believe that there is a God." A second devil got up and said, "I know, I'll go to earth and tell them there's no such thing as hell." "No," said the others, "That's no good. Most people already know something about what hell is in their lives." The third devil got up, and with a knowing smile, gave his idea, and it was met with unanimous, diabolical clapping and cheering. "I know," he said, "I'll go to earth and tell people there's plenty of time!" 1

Advent is an odd season, an odd time of the year in which we ask ourselves to do odd things. It is a season of waiting, as we say over and over again, a season to resist the pull of consumerism with its fantasies of instant emotional fulfillment on credit. There are no Christmas decorations up here in church and there won't be until Christmas actually comes on December 24. We wait, like Mary pregnant with Christ – we wait until the time is fulfilled. Advent is a time to practice what our musty old Northern European ancestors knew from sheer necessity – when it gets dark and cold, it's best to hang up your work wheels, festoon them with evergreen and candles, hunker down and pray for the sun to come back. They knew what our plugged-in, wired-up world has forgotten: human beings cannot work all the time. Busyness may be a socially acceptable addiction, but it is still an addiction and over time it will kill in us what is most genuinely human.

It reminds me of a story a friend of mine tells about his childhood and his grandfather's long-standing Thanksgiving tradition of bringing home a live turkey for the feast. Well, to get from a live turkey to Thanksgiving dinner means doing violence to the turkey and my mischievous friend says that his favorite moment as a gruesome little boy always came after the axe when the headless turkey continued to run around the yard for a while. It was a sight, he says, which every year prompted this wise observation from his grandfather: "Son, the mere presence of activity is no guarantee of life."

So yes, in Advent the church asks us to slow down, practice the patience of pregnancy, and wait for real life to be born in us. But that's not all. Advent presents us with some curious contradictions. The waiting of Advent, it's recognition that we need a break from the outward busyness of life – all of this is not like some vacation on Maui. Our waiting is not just passively sitting on the beach waiting for something, anything, to happen. The kind of waiting we're called to practice is active, watchful, urgent. We're waiting not just for any old thing. We're waiting and watching for something very particular. We're waiting for the coming of

Christ, the full-bodied entrance of God into our human condition. The one who will baptize with fire. “Cast out our sin and enter in, *be born in us today*,” we’ll sing in a couple of weeks. There is one coming, says John the Baptist, one is here in your very midst.

That’s why our Advent liturgy is filled with the words of prophets. Prophecy is so misunderstood in our time. In popular speech it’s come to mean something like soothsaying, as though it were only about predicting the future. What it means in the bible is simply telling the truth, and not primarily about what the future holds, it’s telling the truth about what is right before us today, right here and right now. Prophets are not generally known for their social graces - “You brood of vipers!” (John would not have made a very good rector!) Pay attention, say the prophets, clear out the junk, leave behind your sinful obsessions, make the path straight, set down your anxieties about tomorrow, and prepare to meet God. Because today is the day. Now is the time. There is no other. I think it’s what the Buddhists mean when they speak of practicing now. It is the heart of all genuine meditation. It is the heart of what it takes to make a real difference in the world.

We need to practice now. You know, from a God’s eye perspective, time is not what we usually think it is. We like to think of eternity as something like linear time stretching on forever. But that’s not what eternity means. Eternity means the absence of time. Eternal now. If you’re anything like me you will know something about the delicious and perverse appeal of procrastination. My favorite way of dealing with things I really don’t want to do is to put off doing them ... until they grow so uncomfortable that I cannot avoid doing them any longer. The dentist and the doctor come immediately to mind. But so does the encounter with that person I know I need to confront about the hurtful thing he said to me. So does dealing with my own sin. So does doing something about the injustice of the world. An English monk I know told me once that the Queen Mother had a card placed right in the middle of her desk, and printed there in large letters were “DO IT NOW.” None of us knows when Christ will come and we should be ready to receive him at any moment.

Jesus is born in our here and now, God enters the real world with its politics and pressures, with all its glory and horror. And I do not know exactly when I will meet God, but when I do, it will be in the same way Jesus showed up the first time. It will be in the real world. It will be now. I remember a creative celebration of the eucharist in which the prayers of the people were accompanied by projected images on the wall. One moment there was an ancient icon of Christ, and the next moment the face of a terrified Ukrainian child. One moment a piece of religious art and the next an African mother and her malnourished little girl. One moment a beautiful sunset and the next armed soldiers. The images might very well have included scenes from the streets of Cleveland. The message of those images was clear and it told the truth: If we are to meet Christ, it is here that we will meet him, in this world and not some other. Christ comes again and again and again to this world, and his chosen means to do so is nothing less than you and me. Christ meets the world in us.

Timothy Radcliffe, the former Master of the Dominican Order and as of December 7 who is now a cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church writes this:

Why is waiting so much part of being a Christian? Why cannot God just give us now what we long for, justice for the poor and perfect happiness for us all? ... 2000 years have passed since the resurrection and still we wait for the Kingdom. Why? One reason why our God takes so much time is because he is not a god .... The coming of God is not like the cavalry cantering in to our rescue. God comes from within, inside our deepest interiority. (God) is closer to us than we are to ourselves.... God comes to us as a child comes to a mother, in the depth of her being, through a slow transformation of who she is. Anything else would be violence and a violation. <sup>2</sup>

So Dear St. Paul's, I invite you to wait and watch together in these Advent days. Let us be the presence of Christ in this world. Let it be now.

<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Tristram, SSJE

<sup>2</sup> *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* Continuum, 2005. p. 78.